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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the way two university instructors encouraged students to perceive and understand the influence of their personal environment. The classes, an undergraduate course and a graduate course in education, focused on the integration of art and science disciplines as students reflected on their experience of their environment. A sample activity required students to walk around a city block no less than three times sequentially and then reflect upon the activity, construct a representation of the experience, and engage in class dialog about the experience. These experiences caused some students anxiety, but it led many to recognize their preexisting assumptions and the effects of prior experiences, as well as their differing comfort levels with various representational forms. Implications are drawn for teachers on the importance of the cultural environment that students bring into their classrooms. (Contains 13 references.) (DB)

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# Common Experiences In a Human Environment as a Source for the Dialogical Classroom

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It seems unnecessary to describe that humans exist in environments. Yet by the fact that it is impossible not to exist in a place and time, it is also important to confirm that the environment holds significant meaning for every human being. Unfortunately, the impact of one's environment is often relegated to insignificance by what Bowers (1974) refers to as "taken-for-grantedness". Bowers' point of view suggests that the potential and power of the environment is often not perceived by those engaged within it. That humans are not aware of their environment indicates that they do not critically understand their location and situation.

This paper describes the way two university instructors encouraged students to perceive and understand the influence of their personal environment. We try to capture how simple events were "experienced from the student's side" (Bowers, 1974, p. 21). According to Bowers, creating situations in which students inspect their beliefs "involve[s] eliciting from the students a description (not an explanation that would generally represent something socially acquired) of personal space within the classroom, of the sense of space outside the classroom, and eventually the community" (p. 116). The idea of the activity is to "stimulate the student to think dialectically where a tension emerges between the student's analysis of historical developments and the exitstential questions that have emerged from the student's activity of making explicit the cultural defintions of space impinging on his life" (Bowers, p. 119).

This paper is a description of that activity sponsored within the frameworks of both graduate and undergraduate courses. The focus of these courses was to foster students' inquiry into the disciplines of art and science education. Relatedly a point of consideration was the manner in which these disciplines might be integrated. A method followed in the graduate course

was to have students consider potentially common themes between the disciplines of art and science. To effect these investigations into the making of meaning the authors sponsored a number of activities. The one that proved especially provocative encouraged students to walk around a city block no less than three times sequentially. Following this action the students were encouraged to reflect upon their activity and then produce a representation of that experience.

On the surface, students were asked to describe their feelings and motivations for experiencing the activity; more deeply this experience sought to engage students in a critical investigation of their feelings about ambiguity related to such common involvements, as well as to deal with recognitions of the nature of abstract and concrete associated with being in a particular place over time.

It is believed that by asking students to reflect upon and represent their activities they will better be able to provide opportunities for their own and future students involvement with actions of world-making. Therefore the focus of this narrative is on the intrigue provided when individuals construct representations of their personal context and actions.

## Literature Review

This study uses the following assumptions on thinking from: 1) Greeno (1989) on contextuality, 2) Gibson (1969) on perception, 3) Bowers (1974) on socialization and cultural literacy , and 4) Goodman (1968) on world-making. The idea that a student, or for that matter any individual, can be engaged with their environment recognizes that an event in time is anything but static. Initially there is a necessity for the consideration of any individually experienced event in an environment as being contextually

bound (Greeno, 1989). Contextuality, Greeno suggests, considers that one's thinking is tied to situations (objects, events and time), as well as his/her beliefs and understandings about their own cognition (with the willingness to reorganize that thinking).

Gibson (1969) noted the necessity for perception when engaged in tasks at hand. She suggested perception (point of view) is "an abstracting process" (p. 108), where one's beliefs act as a filter to convert uncertainty into a more orderly state. Gibson also believed perception moves from a fixed to a more exploratory, but selective activity.

Bowers (1974) used Berger's and Luckman's (1967) stages of socialization to explain how one develops a point of view (one's reality). Berger's and Luckman's stages of socialization are externalization, objectivation, and internalization. According to Bowers , externalization involves one in "an [expressive] act in a form that allows it to get into social communication" (p. 31). Bowers explained that the act might be expressive by showing one's point of view:

> The everyday lives of most people involve encountering a reality already structured for them by society. What they communicate is thus largely shaped by what the significant other [parents, teachers, etc.] already legitimized, with the consequence that what they externalize through communicative acts may be only a restatement of already shared and socially legitimized realities. (p. 31)

The influence from another's act (externalization) often times results in what Bowers discussed as objectivation. When an act and its motives (from a parent, teacher, coach, other students, etc) are considered and transformed into anothers' reality "without looking at the questions related

to motive or level of understanding that caused the original interpretation to be made" (Bowers, p. 32) objectivation occurs.

The process of internalization happens after one objectifies another's point of view. Internalization is evident by the way one explains or justifies their actions (e.g., with regards to science teachers and referents start with Tobin & McRobbie, 1996). Bowers did note, however that "The process of internalizing a social definition is not a mechanistic one, but must be continually sustained through conversation and negotiation with the significant other" (p. 34).

Goodman (1968) extended acts of perception to concepts of world-making. Within his point of view an individual makes and remakes the personal world through meaning-filled contact with the environment. During such critical contacts with an environment a participant renders and "re-renders" personally held understandings of the elements of that time and place. What needs to be reinforced here is that the making of such renderings involves effort, skill, and care. To construct meaning from any interaction with the environment entails a concerto of actions including: observation, impression, memory, story-making, picturing, and noting. Subsequent to these actions a participant must delete, combine, deform, and reorganize visualizations so as to break through the stubborn stereotypes that fortify prevalent characterizations of the world (Goodman, 1991).

Additionally, acts of making sense of the world involve developing narratives of those interactions. Greeno & Hall (1997) described the need for students to have the opportunity to share and clarify their perceptions to realize that potential they offer. Freire (1973, 1993) made special note of the value of dialog. Reflecting on his writing of Pedagogy of the Oppressed he described the opportunities that dialog with colleagues served as a process of

marination (Freire, 1993). That is, the physical action of dialog permitted the very ideas and concepts that he held important to be moved from the silence of the mind to the action of interchange. This activity let thought be viewed and over time reviewed in the critical, yet comfortable, environment of colleagial interchange. In the same sense critical interaction can be operationalized in the classroom setting and thus recognize that students have something worthwhile to say and add to discussion. The making of meaning for students happens in them rather than to them.

In short to be involved with one's environment is a complex act. It is an act that is not singular, including actions of perception, reflection, interpretation, and reporting. Nor is it an act that can be taken without responsibility. Freire (1973) powerfully captured how involvement is an action enmeshed in multiple tasks in the statement "Integration with ones context, as distinguished from adaptation, is a distinctively human activity. Integration results from the capacity to adapt oneself to reality plus the critical capacity to make choices and to transform that reality" (p.4).

## A Walk Around the Block

### Methods

Within the frameworks of multi-level courses, students were asked to circumnavigate a city block. To intensify this seemingly simple act students were directed to perform the task no less than three times. Students were not directed to give attention to any particular characteristic of the block except to be open to the potential that the experience would provide a differing and personal conversation for each of the participants. Subsequent to the physical activity students were asked to develop some representation of their experience. The representations that were produced and as might be

suspected were varied including: maps, poems, histographs, audio tapes, video tapes, graphs, charts, and collages.

Important to the varied representational forms that students constructed was the dialog in which the members of the class engaged following their walk. To promote dialog, we asked students to share their inferences (e.g., How does that pertain to . . .? You mean like when you were . . .? or Why would you do it that way?). Goodman (1988) provided a concise explanation for this approach:

> Reflection must include more than just what individuals believe, (it must) help students consider the meaning they give to their words, how these meanings may differ among a given group of individuals, and what experiences influence their ideas and actions. (p 134)

At the beginning of each class, notes were used from the previous sessions to share recollections and provide students the opportunity to share their responses, questions, concerns, or new issues. This cyclic teaching process (observation to inference to observation) used with these students resembles the research methodology discussed by Glaser & Strauss (1967, chap 3). We wanted students to inspect those beliefs they "put on the table". Students wrote two-page narratives about their Walk Around the Block (WAB) and were asked to consider how they constructed their representations.

## Results

This section discusses students reaction to the WAB and uses comments from the students' written reflections to elaborate the points raised in the literature review. Because these students were directed to let the block "talk" to them, they were encouraged to participate and let the experience direct their attention. Within this personally driven task the students,

sometimes reticently, came to see that they had control over the activity and the outcome of their WAB experience. Interestingly, it was evident among the students that with the freedom of the walk there was also an amount of anxiety. Because the parameters of the engagement were mainly self construed students felt an amount of ambiguity for the exercise. Students shared concern for not knowing how to assign, recognize, or respond to their assumptions experienced during the activity.

> [A] majority of our teachers have always told us what to do and how to do it. We were not forced to think on our own; we didn't have to, the answers were always laid out in front of us. This idea was proven to me in class when we were asked to make a visual representation of a block. We were not told how to do it. My group made it how we believed a "science teacher" would want us to make it, with precision. This consisted of quantifying everything. We have been told how to think for so long, that it has become apart of our mind set. How then, do we learn how to think critically?

Indeed that they held assumptions was a revelation for some. Laden within these assumptions developed a sense of recognition of ambiguity within both the walk and the representation.

The simple recognition that the students held, maintained, and developed assumptions about the task of walking around the block led to a more significant realization. Most students initially felt that they held no assumptions about their walk, other than to attempt to meet the needs of the instructors. Once into the experience students recognized that their assumptions about the activity contained a point of view, a place of departure for how they would experience the walk.

We come in contact with these beliefs when we are not sure of ourselves and what is expected related to the classroom. One of our first assignments was to create a representation of a block near campus. Many of us were uncomfortable doing this and were not sure what was expected of us, so we fell back on the beliefs of what we felt the teacher wanted from our previous classroom experiences. Further examining this we discovered that it is our beliefs that influence our perceptions and how we see the world around us.

I had become aware of representation this spring while reading an article, "Cognition and Representation: A Way to Pursue the American Dream". The author, Elliot W. Eisner, was stressing that the process of thinking effects the way we think. By simply changing the representation, the end state, one would have to think differently about the problem (material, etc.). From this I decided to make a video of the city block as if it were thoughts.

Students, prior experience formed a framework that subsequently permitted and/or constrained their present experience. Their point of view acted as a vantage point for each of the participants.

I didn't purposely select images, music, and skits to be symbolic, but they can be viewed that way. The military presentation grabbed the attention of the audience and informed them of my plan. The motion scenes taped on my bike was symbolic of moving on. In addition, those scenes gave some sense of distance to the viewers. The music accompanying the images showed my impression of the image and what that image meant to me. The images were symbolic to each street on the block: on Starin it was the park, on Esterly it was nice homes

> with well groomed lawns, on Main it was the noise and traffic, and on Prairie it was college life with parking problems and disrespect for the land.

Relatedly, the perceived intensity of stimuli sensations also functioned to direct participants' experience in the walk.

> After walking around the block three times, and trying to be observant, I noticed that every time I walked around I saw something different than before. The more I looked, the more I noticed. Since this was the case, I had to decide how to represent my trips around the block, not the block itself. If I was to represent the block itself, I could never finish because every time I looked at it I would look at it differently.

Lastly, personal ability to be conversant in the language of a representational form provided a comfort factor for the participant to share their experience with their fellow students and the instructors. Interestingly, there was a significant amount of diversity in the production of representations. This fact could be related to the comfort zones that students held for their own talents as well as to the facility they held for producing images of their walk.

> Without the presentation of the poster, I think it would have lost all of it's meaning because if you did not know why I put specific pictures and phrases up and specifically why I associated them with certain sides of the block, the poster would have been a failure in the sense of not accurately representing what I noticed and picked up about the block that day.

Interestingly, when students attempted to read and then interpret others' representations their own comfort zones came to bear through their beliefs

that some presentations were more abstract or concrete than others. It would seem that the extent that a sign or symbol can be read is related to the feeling of one's competence in literacy with that method of communications.

> When one creates a representation, one brings along some baggage with them in the form of past experiences, personal beliefs and personal feelings at the time they are working on the project. All of these things combine to create a filter, or point of view. Now all of this seems a bit static, unchangeable, what good is it if we all know what we have this filter we are looking through when we observe the world. How do these filters come about? Can they be changed? The answer to the second is yes, but only if we can think critically.
>
> When we show people our view we have opened up ourselves to an attack. If they agree, then your lucky you have found someone who thinks similarly to you. However, it is more likely that they will not totally agree with what you have presented. Now you are in a dilemma. It is this process of hammering out a compromise that I call critical thinking, and what comes out of critical thinking is a third point of view, previously unrealized. Hence we create knowledge out of the conflicts between two differing points of view.
>
> I have revisited many of the thoughts, ideas and discussions involved in my representation project, and I have realized that words on a page may not do justice to the depth and emotion that I wish to portray. Ironically, I held many of these same feelings as I began to construct the initial project; in fact, it was these very feelings that shaped my representation into the final form that was presented to the class. I fear

that meaning may become lost or hidden behind structured sentences and elaborate vocabulary; in the same way, I worried that the essence of the people living in the neighborhood had been disguised or trapped behind the house fronts.

Finally, it struck me. It is not simply an object that can convey a message, but the arrangement and relationship that the object has with the environment. Looking at a baseball will conjure up different thoughts in different people. How do I drive another's imagination to the place I want them to go. Surround that baseball with a setting, give it a plot, then add background with other objects accessories. Put the baseball into the hands of people you want to reach.

## Implications

The implications of this activity appear to hold significance for people experiencing their environment. This seems especially important for experiences fostered within a teaching/learning setting. Teachers can not forget the culture that students bring to the classroom experience. Students possess assumptions about the nature of the world and its parts. These assumptions act to frame the ways in which individuals approach, perceive, and respond to external stimuli. One assumption that seemed especially powerful during the course represented here was the prevailing student belief that there was a need to have the instructors' "permission" to enter into a new learning experience and problem space. Relatedly, it was less the task of the teacher to describe to students an appropriate vantage point from which to view a problem, as it was to encourage students to use their personal points of reference as a starting place in their perception of an environment and

related experience. To be involved necessitates an acceptance of ideas and expectations that are set and imposed by themselves (Dewey, (1997). And in a similar fashion, the vitality and urgency within a problem space will encourage students to naturally seek the most efficient and unfortunately in some cases is a stereotypic response path.

> As I watched each representation of the block I realized their was a take home message in all the things we did. The way we as teachers decide to represent information and curriculum can greatly vary. The point is to not limit myself in the ways you represent information to students. Allowing myself to attack common curricular topics in a "no holds barred" manner can only benefit my teaching effectiveness.

> Our representation of the block was a bit of art, constructed from, and a window on, our own thinking. Every person's way of doing these kinds of things will be unique. That in itself is a most important consideration in how our students perceive and learn, how we teach, indeed, how we ourselves understand the world and, perhaps, enable others to grow in their own understanding of it.

> What we wanted to say through it all were things like, "This is what we thought about the block. Does this mean anything to you? What does it mean? Can we have a dialogue where-in we find common ground for understanding each other? Understanding the block? Is it important that we do so?" It seems to me that this kind of dialogue is what we must also use when we learn with students, asking them to do the same in return. This kind of exchange is an art that empowers everyone, encouraging lots of real and exiting exploration of ourselves

as well as the rest of the world. As in all arts, improvement requires openness and careful practice.

In my miniature block I depicted two reasons for learning. Esterly was responsible for this inspiration. Flowers dominate the landscape of most homes gathered along Esterly, and a single Macintosh tree was present. The flowers symbolized the enjoyment some people receive from filling their cerebrum with factoids. These few students are excited when they encounter information never before sensed. The apple, on the other hand, symbolized learning information than can only be applied. Average high school students may find learning unpleasant unless it relates directly to their own lives. I think it is safe to say that not everything that is taught can be directly applied to a student's life. How do I influence a student by learning through pure enjoyment of gathering knowledge?

The Walk Around the Block, although a seemingly mindless task, holds a variety of opportunities, for both students and teachers. WAB can lead participants to important arenas of knowing themselves and the environments through which they navigate. And for a student, soon to be a teacher, it can frame a recognition that students have a right and priviledge to pursue mind, their mind (Rinaldi, 1994).

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